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## The Church: Towards a Common Vision. An Extraordinary Ecumenical Achievement

The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has claimed that its recent convergence text on ecclesiology, entitled *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), “represents an extraordinary ecumenical achievement”.<sup>1</sup> Why “extraordinary?” A genuine convergence in ecclesiology would be truly extraordinary since conflicting visions the Church have constituted some of the most difficult causes of division between Christians. Shortly after the foundation of the World Council of Churches in 1948, its central committee found it necessary to affirm that the council was not committed to any particular ecclesiology, that membership in the council would not be based on a particular view of the Church, nor even “that each church must regard the other member churches as churches in the true and full sense of the word”.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the WCC was conceived as a fellowship of

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<sup>1</sup> Faith and Order Commission, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, “Faith and Order Paper no. 214” (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), viii. The complete text of this new multilateral agreed statement is also available in several languages at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision> [accessed November 13, 2014]. At times, in the following essay, this new text will be referred to with the abbreviation: CTCV.

<sup>2</sup> The complete title of the document to which I am referring is “The Church, the Churches, and the World Council of Churches: The Ecclesiological Significance of the World Council of Churches”. The circumstances of its composition and its essential content are nicely summarized by Morris West, “Toronto Statement”, in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicholas Lossky et al. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002<sup>2</sup>), 1137-1139. Erin M. BRIGHAM, *Sustaining the Hope for Unity: Ecumenical Dialogue in a Post-modern World* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012), 110-132, has recently summarized some of the subsequent discussion of this “Toronto Statement” and argued for its enduring relevance for maintaining the inclusivity of dialogue within the WCC. Her view, influenced strongly by postmodernist thought and by the epistemology of

churches who believe that Jesus Christ himself intended the Christian community to be one and that, therefore, they were obliged to seek such unity by overcoming those ecclesiological issues that yet divided them. The “classic” statements about unity from the general assemblies of the WCC – the New Delhi statement on visible unity (1961); the Nairobi statement on conciliar fellowship (1975); the Canberra statement on communion (1991); and the Porto Alegre statement on the call to be the one Church of the creed (2005) – may all be seen as cumulative steps toward greater consensus about ecclesiology.<sup>3</sup>

The difficulty of achieving a common vision of the Church was underlined again, as recently as in 2009, by Cardinal Walter Kasper. In his summary of forty years of bilateral dialogue between Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Reformed and Methodists, he wrote:

Notwithstanding all the important and welcome achievements, a full breakthrough in ecclesiological questions is still to come. Behind the many still unresolved individual questions can be identified one fundamental problem and one fundamental divergence in the understanding of the Church. This becomes clear when we not only ask: *What* is the Church? But also: *Where* is the Church and where is she realized in her fullness? While Protestants answer this question with the response that the Church is realized in communities in which the Word of God is correctly preached and the sacraments are duly administered (CA VII), Catholics answer that the Church of Christ subsists in (*subsistit in*) the Catholic Church, i.e. the Church is concretely, fully, permanently and effectively realized in communion with the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him (LG 8; UR 4).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the claim by the Faith and Order Commission to have made significant progress towards a common ecclesiological vision, if justified, indeed would deserve to be called “an extraordinary ecumenical achievement”.

The hope that more agreement about the Church could be achieved was suggested by the careful analysis of the more than 180 official responses to what was undoubtedly one of the most widely known and

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Jürgen Habermas, cautions against seeking ecclesiological convergence or consensus that might exclude any ecumenical partner. Hereafter the World Council of Churches will be abbreviated as WCC.

<sup>3</sup> The first three of these can be found in *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963-1993*, ed. Günther Gassmann (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), 3-5, while Porto Alegre’s “Called to be the One Church” is printed in *God, In your Grace: Official Report of the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, ed. Luis N. Rivera-Pagan (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), 255-261.

<sup>4</sup> Walter KASPER, *Harvesting the Fruits* (London/New York: Continuum, 2009), 153.

appreciated ecumenical documents of the Twentieth Century – *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* [hereafter referred to as BEM], adopted by Faith and Order in Lima, Peru, in 1982. The final pages of a report on those responses concluded:

The search for Christian unity implies the search for common ecumenical perspectives on ecclesiology. This need is strongly underlined by the analysis of the responses to BEM which reveal many different presuppositions but also convergences regarding the nature of the church. [...] many responses to BEM requested *that ecclesiology be made a major study in future Faith and Order work*. Such an ecclesiology in an ecumenical perspective must take into account the various ideas of the church which reflect the churches' different self-understanding and their views on the nature of the church and its unity. It also requires the search for basic ecclesiological principles, which could provide common perspectives for the churches' different ecclesiologies and serve as a framework for their convergence.<sup>5</sup>

The following pages, first of all, will briefly present the process that produced *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, along with a short summary of its content and contribution. Second, they will argue that the dialogue about ecclesiology has shown that seemingly incompatible convictions about the Church can be seen, in reality, to be complementary insights into that one "complex reality" which is the "mystery of the Church" (see *Lumen gentium* [hereafter LG] 1-8). A third and final section of this essay will propose that Vatican II's teaching that "in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths" (*Unitatis redintegratio* 11) can be applied to ecclesiology. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* represents an initial and promising attempt to articulate what might be called the foundational doctrines of the hierarchy of ecclesiological truths.

## **1. The New Convergence Statement. Its Development and Contribution**

The immediate process leading to the production of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* began with the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order held in Santiago de Compostela in 1993.<sup>6</sup> That Confer-

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<sup>5</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry 1982-1990: Report on the Process and Responses* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 147-148.

<sup>6</sup> I write "immediate process" in order to acknowledge the fact that many Faith and Order programmes over the span of the entire history of the commission since its

ence harvested the important work accomplished since the previous world conference (Montreal 1963), especially *Church and World*, which underlined the nature of the Church as sign and instrument of God's saving design for the world; *Confessing the One Faith*, which demonstrated an encouraging consensus about the entire doctrinal content of the Creed, including what the creed professes regarding the Church; and, especially, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* with its six published volumes of official responses.<sup>7</sup> The analysis of the official responses to BEM had proposed a list of six themes that promised to reveal fundamental points of ecclesiological convergence: 1) the role of the Church in God's saving purpose; 2) *koinonia* / communion; 3) the Church as a gift of the Word of God (*creatura verbi*); 4) the Church as mystery or sacrament of God's love for the world; 5) the Church as the pilgrim people of God; and 6) the Church as prophetic sign and servant of the coming kingdom of God.<sup>8</sup> The very theme of the Fifth World Conference – "Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness" – both reflected the three major publications just mentioned (*Confessing the One Faith*, BEM and *Church and World*) and anticipated the programme devoted specifically to ecclesiology which would subsequently be a principal focus of the work of the Faith and Order Commission.<sup>9</sup>

Dialogue about the ecclesiological themes emerging from the responses to BEM led to a first draft entitled *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, which was published in time for the Harare general assembly of the WCC in 1998. It was intended as a stage on the way toward a common statement and was comprised of six chapters: "The Church of the Triune God", "The Church in History", "The Church as *Koinonia* (Communion)", "Life in Communion", "Service in and for the World", and "Following our Calling: from Converging Understandings to Mutual Recognition". Along with many appreciative responses to this first version there arrived also important comments of constructive criticism. Some called for better integration of the treatment of the

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origin in 1927 have touched upon ecclesiology and, as such, were a kind of "remote" preparation leading to the current text. See the detailed and well documented "Historical Note", appended to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* at pages 41-46.

<sup>7</sup> *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of the Human Community. A Faith and Order Study Document* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990); *Confessing the One Faith* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991); *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Printing* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007<sup>39</sup>); and *Churches Respond to BEM*, vols I-VI, ed. Max Thurian (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986-1988).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry* 1982-1990, 148-151.

<sup>9</sup> See *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, ed. Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994).

Church as communion with the relation of the Church to the Triune God; others pointed out the insufficient treatment of such topics as teaching authority or mission. In addition, the World Conference at Santiago had called for a study on a ministry in service to the universal unity of the Church, which John Paul II had quoted in his letter on ecumenism, *Ut unum sint*, when he invited dialogue about his ministry as the Bishop of Rome.<sup>10</sup> Yet *Nature and Purpose* included no comment about such a ministry.

These constructive criticisms led to a revision entitled *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, which was presented to the general assembly of the WCC in Porto Alegre in 2005. Its four chapters were entitled “The Church of the Triune God”, “The Church in History”, “The Life of Communion” and “In and For the World”. The first chapter integrated much of the biblical material on the nature of the Church as people of God, body of Christ and temple of the Holy Spirit, with biblical insights on the Church as communion (*Koinonia*), with the theme of the mission of the Church as servant of the Kingdom and with the creedal affirmation of the Church as One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. The second chapter highlighted the challenges that the Church always needs to address during the course of history, such as calling sinful believers to repentance, maintaining unity without stifling legitimate diversity and affirming the value of the local churches while safeguarding their communion within the universal Church. The third chapter treated those elements of communion which were often enumerated in the classic statements from the general assemblies of the WCC: faith, baptism, Eucharist, ministry, oversight, councils and synods, with the themes of primacy and authority now included. A final chapter explored the Church’s service to the world in promoting a human society more in keeping with the values of the Kingdom of God – by assisting those who suffer, defending the oppressed, witnessing to the moral message of the Gospel and working for justice, peace and the protection of the environment.

This new text was then distributed to the churches for their evaluation of the revisions that had been made. In addition to the various responses from churches, academic institutes and ecumenical organizations, the plenary commission of Faith and Order, with its 120 members representing the various churches, gathered in Crete from October 6-14 of 2009 and devoted special effort to offering sugges-

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<sup>10</sup> See paragraph 31.2 of the “Report of Section II: Confessing the One Faith to God’s Glory”, in *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*, 243, which is quoted in paragraph 89 of John Paul II’s encyclical letter *Ut unum sint*.

tions for the further revision of *The Nature and Mission of the Church*.<sup>11</sup> A major proposal at Crete was to shorten the text, to make it more accessible and more reflective of the lives of the churches throughout the world. In addition, a substantial contribution from forty representatives of ten Eastern Orthodox and three Oriental Orthodox churches came from a consultation held in Cyprus in the Spring of 2011.<sup>12</sup> One of their principal suggestions was to integrate more clearly the material on baptism, Eucharist and ministry into the presentation of the life of the Church of the Triune God. At its meeting in Gazzada, north of Milan, during the month of July 2011, the Standing Commission of Faith and Order insisted that the text indicate the progress made toward greater ecclesiological convergence, especially concerning the topic of ministry and especially in bilateral agreed statements.<sup>13</sup> Finally, in June of 2012, after further polishing and the addition of minor adjustments, the final version of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* was approved by unanimous consensus.<sup>14</sup> It was received with enthusiasm by the Central Committee of the WCC several months later and subsequently received by the tenth general assembly of the council, held in Busan, South Korea in late 2013.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See *Called to be the One Church: Faith and Order at Crete*, ed. John Gibaut (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> An account of this Orthodox consultation along with the message and report that it produced is available at: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/an-orthodox-response-to-the-nature-and-mission-of-the-church> [accessed January 5, 2015].

<sup>13</sup> A news briefing about the Gazzada meeting can be consulted at: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/progress-cited-in-faith-and-order-agenda> [accessed January 5, 2015].

<sup>14</sup> The approval of the text at Penang, Malaysia, is announced at the following entries on the WCC website: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/eng/a/article/1634/faith-and-order-commissio.html> and <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/eng/a/article/1724/faith-and-order-commissio-1.html> [accessed October 8, 2012].

<sup>15</sup> News of the central committee's reception of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, can be consulted at the following site: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/eng/a/article/1634/central-committee-appreci.html> [accessed October 8, 2012]. The launching of the published text in March 2013, is recounted at: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/wcc-launches-faith-and-order-convergence-text> [accessed January 3, 2015]. Paragraph 27 of the "Report of the Programme Guidelines Committee" from the Busan General Assembly reads as follows: "Seeking the visible unity of the church, engaging in deep theological discussion of the manner in which we can work together in the world is something which is at the core of the WCC mandate. The document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* is an important step towards understanding what it means to be Church today, and the Commission on Faith and Order is subsequently encouraged to take the lead in collecting responses from the churches and furthering the process of reception. Building on this process,



The convergence text opens with an entirely new chapter expressing the origin of the Church in the *missio Dei* or God's salvific plan for the world and the need for unity if the Church is to serve that plan in the best way possible. A second chapter underlines especially the convictions which most Christian communities share about the Church, as reflected in ecumenical dialogue at the multi- and bi-lateral levels. The third chapter highlights growth in agreement about some of the more divisive ecclesiological issues of the past and invites the churches to seek further convergence and consensus about them. A fourth and final chapter returns to the theme of the Church's mission in the world, outlining some of the challenges that Christians share in trying to be faithful to what they believe the Lord is calling them to today. In a nutshell, the text flows from the origin of the Church in the Father's design of sending Christ and the Spirit in mission for the salvation of the world (Chapter One), to substantial convergences about how most Christian communities view the Church (Chapter Two), to an account of progress on controversial points with challenges to make further progress (Chapter Three), to taking up the mission of the Church in responding to the needs of human beings today (Chapter Four).

## 2. Beyond False Oppositions: From Incompatibility to Complementarity

In his 1995 encyclical on Christian unity, Pope John Paul II repeated an idea that is crucial to understanding and seeking unity in faith, when he wrote:

... ecumenical dialogue, which prompts the parties involved to question each other, to understand each other and to explain their positions to each other, makes surprising discoveries possible. Intolerant polemics and controversies have made incompatible

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and in the context of pilgrimage, the commission should start reflecting on contextual ecclesiologies. In light of responses to the document and insights gained in Ecumenical Conversations, reflection should commence on the renewal of churches in their diverse contexts, fully taking into account the traditions and challenges we currently experience". In the view of the present writer, the phrase "start reflecting on contextual ecclesiologies" is unfortunate. CTCV is already attentive to context and, within the legitimate diversity which such contexts display, seeks to uncover basic elements of a COMMON vision of the Church, that is, what the various contextual ecclesiologies together affirm. The entire Report can be found at the following site: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/report-of-the-programme-guidelines-committee> [accessed January 3, 2015].



assertions out of what was really the result of two different ways of looking at the same reality. Nowadays we need to find the formula which, by capturing the reality in its entirety, will enable us to move beyond partial readings and eliminate false interpretations.<sup>16</sup>

A very similar view was more recently voiced by the international dialogue commission between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church in its publication of 2013, looking ahead to the five hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

Dialogue demonstrates that the partners speak different languages and understand the meanings of words differently; they make different distinctions and think in different thought forms. However, what appears to be an opposition in expression is not always an opposition in substance. In order to determine the exact relationship between respective articles of doctrine, texts must be interpreted in the light of the historical context in which they arose. That allows one to see where a difference or opposition truly exists and where it does not.<sup>17</sup>

This general truth concerning ecumenical dialogue is illustrated in many ways by the new Faith and Order ecclesiological text. A good example would concern the traditional tension between Reformation communities, on the one hand, and the Orthodox and Catholic traditions, on the other, regarding the holiness or sinfulness of the Church. As the very word “Reformation” would suggest, the origin of those churches associated with it was rooted in the conviction that something was terribly wrong with the Church and that it needed to be reformed. It would be natural for much of the theology associated with those communities to emphasize not the holiness of the Church, but her sinfulness. For the Orthodox and for Catholics, on the other hand, to speak of the “sinfulness” of the Church almost amounted to blasphemy, since the Church is the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit: “Christ loved the Church and handed himself over for her, to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot of wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25-27).

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<sup>16</sup> *Ut unum sint*, paragraph 38. The full text of the encyclical can be found at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25051995\\_ut-unum-sint\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.htm) [accessed January 3, 2015].

<sup>17</sup> The full text of *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* can be found at: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_2013\\_dal-conflict-to-alla-comunione\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/lutheran-fed-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_2013_dal-conflict-to-alla-comunione_en.html) [accessed December 26, 2014].

CTCV affirms that, while understandable, it is a mistake to place these two views in opposition and, in fact, in the course of ecumenical dialogue, almost all Christians affirm both positions, be they members of the various churches stemming from the time of the Reformation or be they Orthodox or Catholics. The Church is not either a sinful people or the holy bride of Christ. According to the Scriptures and as reaffirmed in the Tradition, the Church is both. The new Faith and Order Church statement first addresses the relation between the Church and human sinfulness:

As a Pilgrim community the Church contends with the reality of sin. Ecumenical dialogue has shown that there are deep commonly held convictions behind what have sometimes been seen as conflicting views concerning the relation between the Church's holiness and human sin. There are significant differences in the way in which Christians articulate these common convictions. For some, their tradition affirms that the Church is sinless since, being the body of the sinless Christ, it cannot sin. Others consider that it is appropriate to refer to the Church as sinning, since sin may become systemic so as to affect the institution of the Church itself and, although sin is in contradiction to the true identity of the Church, it is nonetheless real (CTCV, paragraph 35).

CTCV then proceeds to expose what might be called the "false opposition" between these views, in that both sides would never deny the biblically supported truth proclaimed by the other side.

... Christ's victory over sin is complete and irreversible, and by Christ's promise and grace Christians have confidence that the Church will always share in the fruits of that victory. They also share the realisation that, in this present age, believers are vulnerable to the power of sin, both individually and collectively. All churches acknowledge the fact of sin among believers and its often grievous impact. All recognize the continual need for Christian self-examination, penitence, conversion (*metanoia*), reconciliation and renewal. Holiness and sin relate to the life of the Church in different and unequal ways. Holiness expresses the Church's identity according to the will of God, while sin stands in contradiction to this identity (cf. Rom 6:1-11) (CTCV, paragraph 36).

These two paragraphs illustrate that kind of progress toward "capturing the reality in its entirety" about which John Paul wrote in *Ut unum sint*, as well as the potential fruits of dialogue pointed out by the Lutheran-Catholic statement *From Conflict to Communion*. They suggest that both sides on this issue share much in common, but assign varying degrees of emphasis to their commonly held values.

The genius of *The Church: Toward a Common Vision* is that it seeks to shed a bright light on the fact that many of the different ecclesio-

logical emphases cherished by the various currently divided Christian communities concern values that are shared on all sides. It is not a question of “either/or” but of “both/and”. It is not a matter of either Word or Sacrament, of either institution or event. The Church is both *creatura Verbi* (cf. LG 9, citing 1Pt 1:23) and *sacramentum gratiae* (cf. LG 1). Luther, Calvin and many other leaders of the Reformation were convinced that the Church is the community of both Word and Sacrament; for them, a community without the sacraments would not be a true Christian community according to the will of Christ as seen in Scripture. On the other side, Orthodox and Catholic ecclesiology in no way neglects the Word of God as an essential component of the life of the Church. Even in honoring with equal dignity both Scripture and Tradition, they understand Tradition precisely as the ongoing reception of the Word of God over the course of history – that Word which is revealed in an inspired way in the Holy Scriptures.<sup>18</sup>

In a similar way, one need not, nor should not, opt for either the faith of the believers or the official teaching of leaders, either the royal priesthood of the whole people or the ordained ministry, either justifying faith or the constant effort to love God and neighbor through concrete action. Most Christian communities would affirm both the importance of the witness of the whole body of the faithful (in some form of *sensus fidelium*) as well as the special teaching authority of ordained ministers. Most would also see the biblical teaching on the royal priesthood of the whole people of God as fully compatible with the guidance of specially chosen and consecrated leaders. Christians from all communities hold in harmony the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith and not by works with the teaching of the entire New Testament that Christian discipleship requires certain kinds of behavior, especially the living out of the great commandment of love of God and of neighbor. Multilateral and bilateral dialogue have shown that the vast majority of Christian communities agree on such compatibility, although they may emphasize the importance of one or the other of the elements of each of these dyads in different ways. Dialogue has shown that the various Christian communities can and should be liberated from false dichotomies that have in the past set them in opposition to one another. Faith and Order’s CTCV provides an example and an encouragement for them to do so.

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<sup>18</sup> Vatican II’s *Dei verbum*, paragraph 9, states: “Sacred Scripture is the speech of God, as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit”.

### 3. A Hierarchy of Ecclesiological Truths

One of the important principles of Vatican II regarding ecumenical dialogue states that “in Catholic doctrine there exists and order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation the foundation of the Christian faith” (*Unitatis redintegratio* 11). Recently, Pope Francis reaffirmed this principle, when he wrote in *Evangelii gaudium*:

Given the seriousness of the counter-witness of division among Christians, particularly in Asia and Africa, the search for paths to unity becomes all the more urgent. Missionaries on those continents often mention the criticisms, complaints and ridicule to which the scandal of divided Christians gives rise. If we concentrate on the convictions we share, and if we keep in mind the principle of the hierarchy of truths, we will be able to progress decidedly towards common expressions of proclamation, service and witness. The immense numbers of people who have not received the Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot leave us indifferent. Consequently, commitment to a unity which helps them to accept Jesus Christ can no longer be a matter of mere diplomacy or forced compliance, but rather an indispensable path to evangelization. Signs of division between Christians in countries ravaged by violence add further causes of conflict on the part of those who should instead be a leaven of peace. How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us.<sup>19</sup>

Concentrating on fundamental doctrines which “are more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel” (*Evangelii gaudium* 36) has allowed representatives of currently divided communities to better understand some doctrines which have been divisive in the past. A good example of this is the Anglican-Roman Catholic discussion of the Marian doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption.<sup>20</sup> By beginning with their biblically-grounded,

<sup>19</sup> Paragraph 246; the full text of *Evangelii gaudium* can be found at [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html) [accessed January 3, 2015].

<sup>20</sup> *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*; the full text can be found at the following site: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20050516\\_mary-grace-hope-christ\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20050516_mary-grace-hope-christ_en.html) [accessed January 3, 2015]. Jared Wicks, in his fine commentary on this document, writes: “The luminous framework is that of a largely Pauline doctrine of our graced call and destiny, by which our final sharing in Christ’s glory has already begun”. See his “A Commentary on *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International

common convictions concerning grace and hope and their joint recognition of the unique role of Mary in the economy of salvation, these dialogue partners were able to place in a more intelligible context the Catholic doctrines concerning the special application of the fruits of salvation in her life as expressed in *Ineffabilis Deus* of 1854 on Mary's immaculate conception and in *Munificentissimus Deus* of 1950 on her assumption.

Such a common consideration of fundamental convictions has also paved the way for agreement about two issues which have been at the heart of the divisions which occurred at the time of the Protestant Reformation: the relation between Scripture and Tradition and the doctrine of justification by faith. When, instead of beginning with a reflection of the Scripture and Tradition as distinguishable realities, one first considers the nature of revelation in itself as the self-manifestation of God in history, the relation of Scripture and Tradition appears in a new light. Both Scripture and Tradition emerge as complementary aspects of how revelation in history occurs. Such an understanding was confirmed by the scientific study of the Bible, which led scholars to conclude that, since the formation of Scripture was the result of the coming together of many traditions, there can be no ultimate opposition between the two. Scripture comes from tradition and subsequent tradition aims at an ongoing re-appropriation of Scripture. That said, as the inspired Word of God and supreme norm of Christian life (see Vatican II's *Dei verbum* 21-26 and John Paul II's *Ut unum sint* 79), Scripture is an indispensable measure for discerning what of the tradition is truly of God, allowing us not to confuse what is God's will with merely human traditions which believers develop and which Jesus himself condemned if and when they obscured the will of the Father (cf. Mk 7:1-8). The churches entered a new stage in overcoming their former tensions on this theme with Faith and Order's famous Montreal statement "Scripture, Tradition and Traditions" of 1963, which affirmed: "Thus we can say that we exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel (the *paradosis* of the *kerygma*) testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit".<sup>21</sup>

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Commission" at: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20050516\\_commentary-wicks\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/angl-comm-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20050516_commentary-wicks_en.html) [accessed January 3, 2015].

<sup>21</sup> The essential paragraphs of the Montreal statement appear in *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963-1993*, 10-18, with the above quotation appearing on page 11. In the mid-1990's Faith and Order extended the reflection begun at Montreal with *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), which is also printed, along with essays that contrib-

Similarly, agreement about the doctrine of justification can be seen as placing the whole question of the relation between faith and works within the context of the foundational truths concerning the Trinitarian economy of salvation in Christ.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the most important paragraph of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* states:

In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: by grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.<sup>23</sup>

Commenting on this text, the Reformed theologian Gabriel Fackre noted: "By locating the standard discussion of justification – 'subjective soteriology' – entailing questions about the relation of faith to works, faith to love and hope, forensic to infused grace – in the larger trinitarian-christological framework, the JD and its predecessor documents have set forth an encompassing understanding of the doctrine".<sup>24</sup> This allows for what Fackre calls a "fresh method" for considering long-standing disputed questions. When the closing words of paragraph 15, cited above, state that the Holy Spirit "renews our hearts, while equipping and calling us to good works", it overcomes that mode of thinking

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uted to the study of this theme, in *Interpreting Together: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Peter Bouteneff & Dagmar Heller (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2001), 134-160.

<sup>22</sup> The "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church can be found in *Growth in Agreement*, II, ed. Jeffrey Gros et al. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 566-582; hereafter this volume will be referred to as GA II. An excellent account of this agreement by a participant who was very close to the unfolding developments leading to the joint declaration is John A. Radano, *Lutheran & Catholic Reconciliation on Justification* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Paragraph 15 of the *Joint Declaration*. The complete text can be found at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html) [accessed December 27, 2014].

<sup>24</sup> G. FACKRE, "The Ecumenical Import of the Joint Declaration", in *Reformed World* 52 (2002), 48.



which would place in competition God's action in saving human beings and their active response.

Both of these historic and irrevocable ecumenical achievements, made possible through a recognition that there exists an order or hierarchy of truths among Christian doctrines, have important consequences for agreement about ecclesiological issues that have been divisive.<sup>25</sup> One of these issues concerns the ordained ministry and the relation of the threefold ministry of bishop-presbyter-deacon to the apostolicity of the Church. The greater agreement about the relation between Scripture and Tradition has allowed churches to evaluate the development of ministry in the early church in a more positive light. Faith and Order's CTCV, paragraph 47, points out that:

Almost all Christian communities today have a formal structure of ministry. Frequently this structure is diversified and reflects, more or less explicitly, the threefold pattern of *episcopos-presbyteros-diakonos*. Churches remain divided, however, as to whether or not the "historic episcopate" (meaning bishops ordained in apostolic succession back to the earliest generations of the Church), or the apostolic succession of ordained ministry more generally, is something intended by Christ for his community.

Yet the text also notes that the apostolicity of the Church through various means need not be seen as opposed to seeing ministerial succession one of those means – even as a "normative" means.

There is no single pattern of ministry in the New Testament, though all churches would look to Scripture in seeking to follow the will of the Lord concerning how ordained ministry is to be understood, ordered and exercised. At times, the Spirit has guided the Church to adapt its ministries to contextual needs (cf. Acts 6:1-6). Various forms of ministry have been blessed with the gifts of the Spirit. Early writers, such as Ignatius of Antioch, insisted upon the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon.<sup>26</sup> This pattern of three related ministries can be seen to have roots in the New Testament; eventually it became the generally accepted pattern and is still considered normative by many churches today. Some churches, since the time of the Reformation, have adopted different

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<sup>25</sup> For example, paragraph 216 of *From Conflict to Communion* states: "In the Lutheran–Roman Catholic conversations a clear consensus has emerged that the doctrine of justification and the doctrine of the church belong together".

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Ignatius of Antioch's *Letter to the Magnesians* 6 and 13; *Letter to the Trallians* 7; *Letter to the Philadelphians* 4; *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 8; this note and the following note appear in the text of CTCV 46 itself.



patterns of ministry.<sup>27</sup> Among the several means for maintaining the Church's apostolicity, such as the scriptural canon, dogma and liturgical order, ordained ministry has played an important role. Succession in ministry is meant to serve the apostolic continuity of the Church (CTCV 46).

Before agreement about the importance of the more ancient tradition concerning apostolic succession in ministry could be achieved, the reasons why some communities adopted a different pattern of ministry at the time of the Reformation would need to be addressed. The Council of Trent itself admitted the need for the reform of the exercise of the episcopacy in its various decrees calling for just such reform. Today such a reformed exercise of ministry would certainly be an important consideration in efforts to reach agreement on this issue. CTCV echoes BEM in calling for an exercise of *episkope* that is personal, collegial and communal (cf. CTCV 52 and 56). But if true reform has taken place in the exercise of that ministry, might not a new consideration of apostolic succession in the threefold ministry become possible? Such a re-consideration of the normativity of the threefold ministry should in no way obscure the inestimable value for salvation of those forms of ministry adopted by some communities within the very unique circumstances of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century or even at other times. When Vatican II affirmed that

... the separated Churches and communities as such, though we believe they suffer from the defects already mentioned, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church (*Unitatis redintegratio* 3)

... the council surely did not intend to exclude the ministry of these communities from such salvific efficacy.

Granting a general acceptance of the principle that Scripture and Tradition can be seen as compatible and that some individual traditions may be seen not as "merely human traditions" but as authentic expressions of what is already contained in some way in Scripture and therefore expressive of the will of God, further agreement about the three-

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<sup>27</sup> Two insightful accounts of these Reformation developments are the Reformed-Roman Catholic text "Towards a Common Understanding of the Church", §§12-63, entitled "Toward a Reconciliation of Memories", in *GA II*, 781-795; and the Lutheran-Roman Catholic text, *The Apostolicity of the Church*, Minneapolis 2006, §§65-164, pages 40-71.

fold ministry and its role in the Church's fidelity to her apostolic origins would seem now to be a real possibility.

For its part, the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between Lutherans and Catholics, by situating justification within the trinitarian context of the Holy Spirit calling and equipping the human response to grace, might pave the way for greater agreement concerning the active role that the Church is called upon to play in the design of God for the healing of a world wounded by sin. Recently the agreed statement *From Conflict to Communion* made an important common affirmation concerning the question of human cooperation with God's grace.

To the much discussed question of the cooperation of human beings, a quotation from the Lutheran Confessions is taken in the Appendix to the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* as a common position in the most remarkable way: "The working of God's grace does not exclude human action: God effects everything, the willing and the achievement, therefore, we are called to strive (cf. Phil 2:12 ff.). 'As soon as the Holy Spirit has initiated his work of regeneration and renewal in us through the Word and the holy sacraments, it is certain that we can and must cooperate by the power of the Holy Spirit'" (paragraph 134).<sup>28</sup>

Such an understanding of the initiative of God and the instrumentality of the Church is incorporated into CTCV.

It is God's design to gather humanity and all of creation into communion under the Lordship of Christ (cf. Eph. 1:10). The Church, as a reflection of the communion of the Triune God, is meant to serve this goal and is called to manifest God's mercy to human beings, helping them to achieve the purpose for which they were created and in which their joy ultimately is found: to praise and glorify God together with all the heavenly hosts. This mission of the Church is fulfilled by its members through the witness of their lives and, when possible, through the open proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. The mission of the Church is to serve this purpose (CTCV 25).

Agreement about God's design for the Church leads Faith and Order to affirm:

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<sup>28</sup> *Joint Declaration*, Annex 2C, quoting "The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration", II. 64f., in BC [= *The Book of Concord: The Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Minneapolis, MN 2000], 556; this note appears in paragraph 134 of *From Conflict to Communion* itself.

While there is wide agreement that God established the Church as the privileged means for bringing about his universal design of salvation, some communities believe that this can be suitably expressed by speaking of the “Church as sacrament”, while others do not normally use such language or reject it outright. [...] All agree that God is the author of salvation; differences appear concerning the ways in which the various communities understand the nature and role of the Church and its rites in that saving activity (CTCV 27).

This leads the commission to conclude:

*Those who use the expression “the Church as sacrament” do not deny the unique “sacramentality” of the sacraments nor do they deny the frailty of human ministers. Those who reject this expression, on the other hand, do not deny that the Church is an effective sign of God’s presence and action. Might this, therefore, be seen as a question where legitimate differences of formulation are compatible and mutually acceptable? (CTCV 27)*

Thus, the agreement about justification could allow Christians to overcome or at least to reduce their disagreements concerning the instrumentality or sacramentality of the Church. All can acknowledge that the Church is a privileged means for bringing about God’s design of salvation, without jeopardizing the fact that God is the ultimate, primary and indispensable agent in that saving activity. Agreement that the Church as a whole serves as a means and instrument of God’s salvific design through the power of the Holy Spirit also opens a wider framework for considering the various rites which so many churches celebrate, not only baptism and eucharist, but also confirmation, penance, anointing, marriage and ordination.<sup>29</sup>

As the previous paragraphs have attempted to show, the new perspective which comes when one considers particular doctrines within the broad context of the hierarchy of truths can open the possibility of “capturing the reality” in a more complete way, as mentioned by John Paul II in *Ut unum sint*. The breakthroughs regarding Scripture and Tradition and regarding justification by faith have ramifications for ecclesiological questions such as the development of the threefold

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<sup>29</sup> See the reflection about possible further convergence regarding confirmation, penance, anointing, ordination and marriage between Lutherans and Catholics in “Facing Unity” (1984), paragraphs 75-82; full text found at: [http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e\\_l-rc\\_facing.html](http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e_l-rc_facing.html) [accessed January 3, 2015]. A similarly hopeful reflection is recorded in the Methodist-Catholic agreed statement “Speaking the Truth in Love” (2000), at paragraphs 52-61; the complete text can be found at: [http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/m-rc/doc/e\\_m-rc\\_brighton01.html](http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/m-rc/doc/e_m-rc_brighton01.html) [accessed January 3, 2015].

ministry as a faithful expression of the apostolicity of the Church or the cooperation of the Church as servant or sacrament of God's design for the salvation of the world.

May not *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* reflect the fact that there also exists a hierarchy of ecclesiological truths? Christian divisions often originated in mutual condemnations concerning quite specific issues, usually related more to practice than to doctrine. By situating the origin and *raison d'être* of the Church in the eternal design of God in creation and redemption, by relating her nature to the *missio Dei* and to the initiative of the three persons of the Trinity, by elaborating commonly held biblically rooted insights into the reality of the Christian community as a communion which is a priestly, prophetic and royal people of God, the body of Christ and temple of the Spirit, by seeing her as a means serving the Father's plan of salvation, as including a rich variety which is shared by local communities joined together with all other such communities in a mission to witness to Christ and to serve the healing of a broken world – by claiming that all of these affirmations express common convictions to which the membership of the vast majority of Christian communities are firmly committed, *The Church* takes a giant step away from the polemical attitudes which governed the events causing division in the past.

## Conclusion

Tensions will always remain within the Church; they have been present from the beginning. But with continual conversion under the power and ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit, it is possible to identify some of the supposed oppositions that divided Christians in the past as false oppositions, as John Paul suggested in *Ut unum sint* 38. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* is infused with this spirit. This new Faith and Order convergence text offers an opportunity to go beyond that vision of two fundamentally conflicting ecclesiological understandings which was described in the quotation from Cardinal Kasper at the beginning of this essay: the understanding of the Church as realized in communities where the Word is correctly preached and the sacraments duly celebrated and the understanding of the Church as realized in communion with the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him. Would not a Catholic say that the Church is both of these? Might not other Christians say the same?

In today's "postmodern" world that celebrates relativity, contextuality and diversity and which is skeptical of claims to truth, the very

idea of unity could seem oppressive and stifling.<sup>30</sup> Many today may not see the unity of the Church as attractive or desirable. And yet, the entire ecumenical movement has from its beginning been based upon the conviction that Jesus Christ himself wants all his followers to be one. I find it helpful and hopeful in this regard to recall the New Testament ecclesiological teaching that the Church is the bride of Christ (cf. Eph 5:25-32). Faith and Order's convergence text closes with the words: "Christ loves the Church as the bridegroom loves his bride (cf. Eph. 5:25) and, until the wedding feast of the lamb in the kingdom of heaven (cf. Rev. 19:7), shares with her his mission of bringing light and healing to human beings until he comes again in glory" (CTCV, paragraph 69). Christ prayed for the unity of his disciples on the night that he gave them his body and blood in the Eucharist, on the eve of his sacrifice on the cross. Christians today need to try to bring to full realization in the lives of their communities those words they pronounce every day and with which the "Introduction" to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* begins – "Thy will be done".



*La mancanza di accordo per quanto riguarda la natura e la missione della Chiesa è forse la causa primaria per le divisioni fra cristiani. Questo saggio offre una presentazione del recente «testo di convergenza» della commissione Fede e Costituzione, intitolato La Chiesa: verso una visione comune (2013). Il fatto che «esiste un ordine o una gerarchia delle verità della fede» (Unitatis redintegratio 11), proposto recentemente di nuovo da papa Francesco in Evangelii gaudium, paragrafo 246, può essere considerato come un principio che ha reso possibili due dei consensi più significativi ormai raggiunti del dialogo ecumenico: quello sulla complementarità della Scrittura e della tradizione (Montreal 1963) e quello sulla giustificazione per la fede (Augsburg 1999). Questi accordi aprono la strada per una convergenza più grande su due temi ecclesologici molto importanti: il ministero triplice del vescovo-presbitero-diacono e la comprensione della Chiesa come sacramento. La Chiesa: verso una visione comune ci invita a considerare se, alla luce di questo nuovo testo di convergenza, sia adesso possibile fare un progresso verso un consenso su questi due temi spinosi. Le numerose convergenze sulla natura e sulla missione della Chiesa ricordate in questo testo di convergenza possono essere considerate come un primo tentativo di formulare una «gerarchia delle verità ecclesologiche della fede».*




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<sup>30</sup> Thus Erin Brigham's "Introduction" to her *Sustaining the Hope for Unity*, 1, begins with a statement that, to those who have worked for a long time in the ecumenical movement may sound discouraging: "In an era shaped by the process of globalization, the concept of 'unity' is complex and ambiguous".

*Disagreement about the Church is perhaps the primary reason underlying Christian divisions. The present essay presents the recent convergence statement of the Faith and Order Commission entitled The Church: Towards a Common Vision (2013). The principle that “there exists an order of ‘hierarchy’ of truths” (Unitatis redintegratio 11), recently quoted again by Pope Francis in Evangelii gaudium, paragraph 246, can be seen as making possible two of the most important achievements of ecumenical dialogue – those concerning Scripture and Tradition (Montreal 1963) and concerning justification by faith (Augsburg 1999). These agreements open the door for greater agreement about two important ecclesiological themes: the threefold ministry of bishop-presbyter-deacon and the understanding of the Church as sacrament. The Church: Towards a Common Vision explores how greater convergence may now be possible on these two crucial ecclesiological topics. Its many convergences about fundamental aspects of the nature and mission of the Church may be seen as a first attempt to express what might be called a “hierarchy of ecclesiological truths”.*

ECCLESIOLOGIA ECUMENICA – GERARCHIA DELLE VERITÀ –  
COMMISSIONE FEDE E COSTITUZIONE – MINISTERO TRIPLICE –  
CHIESA-SACRAMENTO